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ABSTRACT

Issues and factors involved in four types of cooperative acquisitions agreements are discussed--general agreements to collect certain classes of material, agreements to purchase specific titles, agreements to cooperate on expensive items, and joint acquisitions. It is argued that the more specific the agreement, the more difficult are the technical problems to be solved before making the agreement: nine such problems are summarized in the conclusions. (JEG)

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TECHNICAL PROBLEMS OF COOPERATIVE ACQUISITIONS PROGRAMS BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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TECHNICAL PROBLEMS OF COOPERATIVE ACQUISITIONS PROGRAMS BETWEEN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

by M. MORAN

The idea of libraries cooperating among themselves in their acquisitions programs is one of the most honored ideas in current librarianship. The probable reason can be found in the information explosion which has made it impossible for any one library to collect everything that is published. Further, success in other areas of cooperation, such as interlibrary loan, cooperative cataloging, and bibliographic control have raised hopes that cooperative acquisitions can be made to work. However, there are a number of technical difficulties which must be solved before a cooperative acquisitions system can become anything more than a fine sounding idea.

This paper is only concerned with cooperation between individual institutions, rather than with administratively separate centers established by cooperating institutions or by government agencies. Such centers have many of the problems described in this paper but many other unique problems as well.

DEFINITION OF "COOPERATIVE ACQUISITIONS"

A cooperative acquisitions program is a specific formal agreement among two or more libraries wherein one of them agrees to acquire and made available certain material or types of material of common interest which the others agree not to acquire, in return for the right to use the collections or parts of the collections of the other libraries acquired under the cooperative agreement. It will be seen throughout the rest of this paper that a successful program is one which implements all the elements of the definition.

A cooperative acquisitions program must be distinguished from discrete collection building among different kinds of institutions. A cooperative acquisitions program cannot be based upon the fact that two institutions have different programs which their Libraries are obligated to support in any case. An agricultural institute library of necessity acquires material on forestry and agriculture. The nearby Islamic school of theology must buy books on Islam. The librarians of the two institutions may meet and urge each other to build strong collection in their respective areas. They may even set up a system of inter-library loan in case they have occasional need of material. But this is not cooperative acquisitions. There is no room for agreement, for give and take, for relying on each other's word. The librarians are simply acknowledging that their institutions have different goals and thus different library programs. Only material of common interest is the subject matter of cooperative acquisitions programs.

There must an agreement reached to constitute a cooperative program. Two institutions may have an interest in the same program but cooperative acquisitions does not take place until an agreement has been reached. For example, two institutions may have colleges of science. One library has, for one reason or another, built up a strong collection of materials in the history of science. The other library makes the decision to severly restrict its collecting of history of science and rely upon the other library's collection. This is not cooperation, although it may be sound librarianship. On the other hand the second library may decide to build up its history

of science program in spite of the other's collection. This is not being uncooperative in any sense, since no agreement was ever reached between the two libraries. Both libraries may have good reasons for wanting their own collections, and may be able to afford them. If the decision to duplicate the collection of the other library was made without due consideration of the existing collection we may have an example of poor librarianship, but not necessarily lack of cooperation.

There are three main types of cooperative acquisitions agreements. These will be treated starting with the more general and proceeding to the more specific. It will be seen that the more specific the agreement gets the more difficult are the technical problems involved in establishing effective systems.

GENERAL AGREEMENTS TO COLLECT CERTAIN CLASSES OF MATERIAL

Two libraries may agree to cooperatively develop their collections in certain areas. For example, one library agrees to collect in the history of science, and the other to collect in modern English literature.

The first problem to be faced is whether the agreement is to be written or verbal. While verbal arrangements may be suitable for the short run they are not to be recommended for the long run. The reason is simply that people tend to forget things that are not written down. When the staff changes it is much easier to continue a policy made years ago if there is something in writing to refer to. Even when the agreement is written there are two further problems. How is the staff to be reminded that the agreement has been reached? If the agreement is kept in the old correspondence files, or is burried in the files of the concerned department heads it stands good chance of being lost sight of. But, more importantly, how will the users of the library be informed that this agreement is in effect. When a patron comes into the library looking for something on the history of science how will he know that he is to rely upon the collection of another library. True, if he asks the appropriate librarian he may be told, but he may never ask. There should be some kind of public notice that the agreement has been reached. Certainly the agreement should become a part of the official records of the library. If there is a Procedural Manual the agreement should be a part of it. Possibly guide cards may be placed in the subject catalog at the appropriate subject area .

But this raises the question of just exactly what material is available on this kind of cooperative agreement. If the patron sees a guide card he will have every right to ask exactly what material is available. In other words he really ought to have bibliographic access to the other collection either in the form of a list or separate card file. If the cooperating library is near by he can consult its catalog directly. If he locates a desired item there must be a very clear and workable system for permitting him to circulate the book. He ought to have generally the same circulation rights he would have in his own library. On the other hand he should also be subject to the same fines and penalties for overdue and lost books, etc.

These rights and priviledges are generally accorded, not on the basis of cooperative agreements, but upon general common circulation agreements covering all library materials. However, there is nothing wrong in principle with giving better access to users generated by cooperative agreements than to other kinds of users. Indeed it should be so.

The same is true to a lesser degree when the institutions are physically separated by a considerable distance. The same bibliographic access is necessary, and the same circulation policies, but in addition there is the question of having an efficient inter-library loan system. The internal mail system of the country must be trustworth and efficient, so that requests, shipments and returns can go through without undue delay. The same is true of the telephone system. If the country has not reached the stage where communications are fast and efficient then cooperative acquisitions agreements between distant universities will not be effective.

Another key problem in these agreements is the question of priority in ordering. If one library agrees to collect in history of science it should give first priority to that subject in its ordering patterns. The other libraries are relying upon it for that subject and since it is getting the benefit of the other libraries' collections it should consider history of science to be of primary importance. Further, it should accept purchase requests from other libraries, and should give them highest priority. The usual situation is probably otherwise, however. The publications which are the subject of the cooperative agreement are often not subjects of highest priority in the university and, are often esoteric. If another library requests that an expensive item be purchased and circulated to it when received the answer often is that it can only be purchased if funds allow, or that the order will be put in with the general stream of orders. Such an answer is contrary to the spirit of a cooperative agreement, and indicates that only lip service is given to it.

AGREEMENTS TO PURCHASE SPECIFIC TITLES

These agreements are generally the result of a conference of librarians who have reviewed their needs for certain titles in subjects of common interest which are either expensive or will be little used and have agreed to purchase the list between themselves. The biggest problem connected with this type of arrangement is to see that the decision is made permanently public, so that all potential users know that a cooperative purchase has been made, and so that subsequent staff members do not unknowingly duplicate the purchase. The only sure way to do this is to have the purchased titles reflected in the public catalogs of the respective libraries. The cataloging entry should give full bibliographic information, possibly the classification number assigned by the other library, and should bear some notation that the title is available in or from the other library.

Cataloging librarians are reluctant to introduce into their own catalogs the records of other institutions, possibly with good reason. Once the entry has been made it must also be maintained. Cataloging changes, revisions, additions, deletions, all should be reported to the cooperating libraries so that their records can be adjusted also. If these adjustments are not made the records become obsolete, and the cooperative purpose is not served.

AGREEMENTS TO COOPERATE ON EXPENSIVE ITEMS

Often libraries feel that cooperation is best served in the case of very expensive items. Publications costing many thousands Dollars can be conveniently purchased by one library for the common use of others. Such agreements are based upon a specific amount over which a cooperative decision should be made. For example the agreement might be that any item costing over $1,000 is to be the possible subject of a cooperative agreement. There are many serious technical problems connected with this type of agreement. If a library wishes to purchase one of these expensive items for its own use it must first contact all the other involved libraries in order to determine if any of the other Libraries:

1. already has the item
2. intends to purchase it
3. already has it on order.

This requires an immediate collection development decision on the part of the other Libraries. If any one of them also wants to acquire the item for its own use then the two libraries must agree on who is to buy it. If none of the other libraries wants to buy it they must notify the original library without undue delay. If the responses do not come in a reasonably short time the original library may loose patience and order the item anyway,thus destroying confidence in the agreement. This could also happen if internal communications in the country are not well developed and reliable. When all the notifications are in, the original library must notify the others that it placing the order. The others are then faced with the problems outlined above; how to make the decision known to their staffs and users and how to provide physical access.

Agreements of this type work better in large metropolitan areas where there are several institutions and where committees can get together and discuss purchases. They work less well when mail must be relied upon.

JOINT ACQUISITIONS

A joint acquisition occurs when two or more libraries contribute money toward the purchase a publication. This can take place when the several libraries need the item but none can afford to purchase it individually. This is the most difficult type of cooperative agreement.

The item will generally be shelved at one of the libraries. It may seem that the item could be shelved in each library on a system of rotation, but the following problems immediately appear

under such a system:

a. The item must be cataloged in one library's system and that system would have to be compatible with the other systems.

b. If both libraries tried to property stamp the volumes a great deal of confusion could result in the minds of users, and even in the clerical staffs of the libraries.

c. Sending titles back and forth could be hazardous unless the mail system was very well developed and efficient.

Who has the legal title to the book? In theory both of the libraries would have joint title, but how would the joint title be shown? Some statement of joint ownership could appear on the cataloging entry of each library and should also appear on the publication. But this is complicated by the difficulty of property stamping and marking the publication.

However the legal title question is settled it will be necessary to have the decision reflected in the accounting records of the institution. Auditors have to be notified that item for which institutional money was spent is not actually on the premises of the institution, and that auditing must be done in coordination with another institution. This procedure might be worked out easily in the West but it seems doubtful that conservative auditing systems in developing countries would allow for it. My observation of Middle Eastern affairs is that there is a tradition of baksheesh and under the table payments. The recent Lockheed pay-offs scandal was greeted with surprise by many in the Middle East where this kind of thing is standard procedure. Yet the accounting and auditing systems of some developing countries go to great lengths in their procedures to prevent just such occurrances. These procedures are a result of a climate of distrust. Their assumption is that baksheesh will take place, and the job of the auditor is to catch the guilty. It seems to me that the assumption in the West is that transactions are free of graft but they will be audited just in case. A climate of mistrust makes it very difficult to create the kind of open atmosphere that libraries need to cooperate effectively. If every movement of books, or transfer of title must be elaborately justified out of fear of rigid auditing before it can take place there will be a strong tendency to forget the whole thing.

Since both institutions own the item both have the right to access to it and such access must be provided by the library housing it. In addition, the item must be reflected in the catalogs of all the joint purchasers since they all own it.

SUMMARY

Visualize the situation 10 to 15 years after a cooperative agreement to purchase some expensive titles has been reached and the titles purchased. Most of the staffs of the cooperating libraries have left and been replaced by new people. Likewise most of the faculty have been replaced by others. How are the new people on the scene to know about the cooperatively purchased titles? Is the agreement evident in the records of the respective institutions? Have the cooperating libraries not purchased the titles which were not assigned to them? Has physical access for the users of the libraries which did not purchase the titles been nearly as good as if they had them in their own libraries? Have the cooperating libraries been kept informed of changes in the physical or bibliographic character of the titles? Have the libraries been able to easily satisfy their administrations and accounting staffs that everything was done properly? Have decisions on further titles to be purchased been made quickly and efficiently and without causing delay to the users of the collections? If these and other technical problems have been satisfactorily handled it could be said that the cooperative agreement was indeed a success. If not the agreement will have been effective in name only.

CONCLUSIONS

Nothing is easier for librarians to do than to make facile agreements to cooperate on acquisitions. The idea appeals to all of us and is written and talked about all the time in the library systems in the West. It is therefore correspondingly easy for the Librarians of the developing countries to expect that workable systems can be easily implemented in their own countries. But what is the actual success of these programs? The literature of librarianship seldom describes programs that do not work. The very idea that cooperation may not work seems to be traitorous to the profession. The simple thing is to say that we have the agreement and that it must be working. Indeed it is difficult to prove that it does not, because there is little provision for feedback in cooperative agreements. If a user looks in the catalog of a library for a certain title and does not find it he assumes that the library does not have it and generally goes away. If it was a cooperative title available elsewhere the implementation of the agreement has broken down badly but who is even aware of it?

If cooperating libraries are willing to make the difficult technical decisions necessary to make cooperative agreements work, at least in theory, then they can assume that the agreements will work. To make the agreement without solving the technical problems first makes it probable that the agreement will not work.

The technical problems which must be solved are:

1. Bibliographic access to the title or titles involved in the agreement. Access should be equally good for all the cooperating libraries.

2. Circulation policies should be equally good for all the cooperating libraries.

3. Internal communications and transportation in the country should be reliable so that bibliographic and physical access to the material is not hindered by long delays.

4. Agreements should be about specific materials or types of materials.

5. Agreements should be written and available in the permanently held records of each institution.

6. First priority in ordering should be given to cooperative acquisitions materials.

7. An efficient interlibrary loan system must be in existence.

8. Decisions regarding cooperative acquisitions must be made quickly by all cooperating parties.

9. Legal and accounting questions should be resolved.